

Time and Human Identities in Homer's *Iliad*

Far from lacking the concept of integrated, whole human beings, (Long 2015, Snell 1982) Homer's *Iliad* displays concepts of humanity that—if unfamiliar to modern readers—can enrich our discourse on personal and collective identity. Insofar as the work develops concepts of identity, it does so with reference to time. Specifically, through explorations of time, the poem develops ideas concerning what it is to be a) human and b) a specific individual. I argue that a shared 'mortal identity' is portrayed in comparison with other forms of life: that humanity's unique status relative to gods and other mortal life is expressed as a product not just of time's long-term wasting effects, but also of the day and its swift changes.

Further, I argue that these two notions of temporality, operating on different timescales, are used both to categorize humans as a group and to problematize the ways in which we mark out individual identities. Personal narratives are a medium through which we form identities (McAdams 1995). I will argue, using insights from narrative psychology, that the power of these narratives in relation to time is questioned throughout the epic.

The *Iliad* frequently addresses time as a thematic concern (not restricted only to uses of χρόνος) (De Jong 2007). For example, Vernant's 'beautiful death' captures the importance of temporality in heroic ethics. By accepting death in battle the hero achieves immunity to the wasting effects of time; this establishes time as the force against which heroes struggle (Vernant 2001). Such interactions with time are central to the poem's vision of humanity.

Who are mortals, and what does it mean to stand as an individual among them? Two distinct notions of temporality intertwine to address these central questions. First, time in the long-term—the extended but finite human lifetime—is captured in the concepts of *moira* (Dodds 1991) and *aisa*, (fate, the limited allotment granted to each individual). These concepts

express that all people share the same relationship with time in the long term. Yet, *moira* becomes something with an endpoint in concrete time, on a fateful ‘dawn or afternoon or midday,’ as illustrated by Achilles’ speech when he is about to kill Lykaon (21.106-113). The swiftness of change in human life, and its embodiment in concrete hours and days, becomes more critical as narrative events progress.

Human relationships to long-term and short-term time are further developed through a program of similes, which draws attention to the eventual obliteration that men share with felled trees, flowers, and the like (13.188-90, 13.389, 13.437, 18.56-7, 18.437-8, et al.). Yet such comparisons implicitly demonstrate difference as well (Buxton 2004, Snell 1982). In the famous battlefield encounter of Diomedes and Glaukos, despite the comparison of men with generations of leaves (6.121-43), personal identity asserts itself as a specifically human way of contending with time. Eventual obliteration in no way diminishes the heroes’ need to govern their lives with a sense of self. Using a life narrative to describe oneself as an individual with a coherent life and purpose is a uniquely human struggle: the “problem of identity” (McAdams 1995).

The poem demonstrates problems inherent in such narrative expressions of identity; they are not purely about the past (for they attempt to explain one’s present self and predict future behavior), and therefore subject to forces beyond our control. The final day of Patroklos and its interpretation in the text serve to demonstrate that any quality a man might say he has, can swiftly be overturned (16.784-797; 16.686-691). As the poem progresses, and fleeting hours and days determine individual’s strengths and successes, the difficulty of defining an individual becomes more apparent. When Achilles describes the jars from which Zeus deals mixed portions to mortals (24.525-533), he observes these narrative events and translates them into a new vision of humans as creatures vulnerable to a single day, even an instant, of time.

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